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Ghosting Through Our Ruins¹

Professor Michael Cawood Green, Northumbria University, U.K.;

Research Fellow of the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

michael.m.green@nrthumbria.ac.uk

ABSTRACT:

This creative/critical paper explores the implications for the postcolonial of what John Wylie calls a 'spectral geography'. 'Spectrality' Wylie defines as 'the unsettling of self, the haunting taking-place of place'; it 'demands new, themselves haunted ways of writing about place, memory and self'. The critical self-reflexivity implicit in such a perspective is brought to bear on a recent migrant to the UK attempting to negotiate ideas of Africanness and Englishness through the rewriting of places linked by a statue in a small Northumberland village commemorating the death of a local officer killed in the 'Anglo-Boer War'. The inclusions and exclusions inscribed into intersecting contemporary and historical landscapes haunted by a heritage of Empire result in the subjectivity of the writer being tested against his taking shape, materialising, in relation to material that is in itself fluid in terms of its expression of place, the past, and identity.

Key Words: practice research; creative/critical; Empire; Anglo-Boer War; commemoration; landscape; identity, spectrality.

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'One of the more intangible of those duties and responsibilities [of a new citizen] is no matter what one's birth and background, to accept the historical past of the new country as one's own.'

J M Coetzee, pledge of commitment to Australia, 2006.

1.

By the left, best foot forward, he strides up Beaumont Street, in uniform with riding breeches and spurs. At the intersection with Hencote and Battle Hill he freezes, right foot behind, heel up, left hand folded against his hip, right hand raising his binoculars. Bareheaded, he stares out over the sweep of his obligatory Victorian moustache, his brow and nose cut as straight and clean as in any of his pictures, the jaw a touch stronger, the cheeks less sunken, his eyes set well back in features born to be sculpted. Imperious, his body wide open to the world, his head is quarter-turned towards his family home near the village of Fourstones. But those eyes, eager, watchful, scan another landscape, wider and more open, even, than Northumberland.

In a moment his right hand will complete its arc, bringing his binoculars up to his eyes. In that instant, the sun glimmers through the murk of rain and mist to glint off the glass, and a bullet tears into that delicately poised right leg, smashing the bone just below the knee before ricocheting off into the flesh of his arm.

He falls, as all around him the veldt comes alive with Boers materialising as if by magic out of the sodden haze, crouching ghosts using their Mausers like pistols at such close range, barrels blossoming red and orange against the whiteout.

But now, in every weather, he is forever taking that last step, forever, fatally, raising his binoculars. Upright on a stone pedestal with a gently curved dado and simple entablature, he imposes his authority on passers-by at the busiest intersection in the market town of Hexham. Mid-stride, though, he has faded into familiarity and bird droppings.

On the south face of the pedestal there is a bronze plaque, but getting close enough to read it takes some effort. The fact that someone has negotiated the staggered crossroads to the statue's hemmed-in, traffic-bound site and stepped cautiously through the flower beds around its base to reach the plaque, marks him out as not from here, the object of more curious glances from passing locals than the statue ever attracts. But there he is, scribbling in his notebook as he makes out the raised Roman letters:

TO THE MEMORY OF A GALLANT SOLDIER

GEORGE ELLIOTT BENSON

LIEUT.COLONEL

IN THE ROYAL REGIMENT OF ARTILLERY

WHO WAS BORN AT ALLERWASH MAY 24TH 1861

ENTERED THE ARMY MAY 9TH 1880

AND AFTER SERVING WITH DISTINCTION

IN THE SOUDAN CAMPAIGN OF 1885, 1896, 1898

IN THE ASHANTI EXPEDITION 1895

AND IN THE SOUTH AFRICA WAR 1899-1901,

FELL WHEN COMMANDING HIS COLUMN

AT THE BATTLE OF BRAKENLAAGTE OCT. 30TH 1901.

HE IS BURIED WITH THOSE WHO FOUGHT

AND DIED WITH HIM

“THE UNRETURNING BRAVE”

ERECTED BY PUBLIC SUBSCRIPTION

It is the misspelling that intrigues the note taker: ‘Brakenlaagte’ makes no sense in Afrikaans, nor is there any place called ‘vomit-hollow’ in South Africa. He’ll do his homework, of course, discover that the battle takes its name from a farm in what was then the Eastern Transvaal, although it was fought at the intersection of a number of farms: Nooitgedacht, Kruisementfontein, Onverwacht, and Bakenlaagte. The final assault took place on Nooitgedacht, but for some reason it was Bakenlaagte that stuck, along with its misspelling.

Discovering its correct spelling won’t really help: *Baken* – he plays with the word: ‘beacon’? Not much there to go with *laagte*, ‘hollow’ or ‘low’. He’ll find references to a Bakenkop – Beacon Hill – which makes sense, but Bakenlaagte is a mystery. Months later, he will be only mildly surprised to discover, walking in fading light through the copse of blue gums planted by the Boers on the site it has taken him the best part of a day to locate, that there is no other monument where this last major battle of the Second Anglo-Boer War was fought. An outlandish reminder of a distasteful past, it is as foreign and invasive in today’s landscape as this tangle of weedy saplings and ghostly trunks, shining white where the bark has peeled away in long dark fingers.

There’s no getting away from them in England however, the markers of the first of the nation’s foreign wars to haunt its own landscape so prolifically. A flood of newspapers, illustrated magazines, and controversy saw to that, nowhere more so than in Northumberland, from the ‘Shitty Angel’, that winged figure of victory atop the massive Northumbrian Regiments Boer War Memorial under its flocks of pigeons in central Newcastle, to monuments of various shapes and sizes in many of the smallest villages. The strange names

they commemorate, foreign, unpronounceable, irrelevant to the lives going on around them, produce small shocks of connection, link improbable places in a spectral web of Empire, wealth, and melodrama.

That it is Benson is simply a coincidence. His statue happens to stand in the market town nearest to the small village which the person now so earnestly making notes has made his new home. The accidental conjuncture of where he came from and where he lives now seems to create an obligation of sorts, some kind of responsibility. He looks around at the scurry of people dodging the first heavy drops from the black clouds that have closed in and then turns back to the plaque. 'To the memory of – '? If anything, the statue seemed to ensure that Benson can now be safely forgotten.

2.

As soon as news of Benson's death reached Hexham, a memorial committee and public subscription were established. When he had returned from the Nile Expedition, a hero after capturing 900 Dervishes at the battle of Atbara, the people of Newbrough and Fourstones had presented him with a silver jug and a cigar case: he was owed so much more now. A statue was decided upon – a rare honour for a field officer – but George Elliott was the youngest son of a wealthy man, and his brother William, by then head of the family, employed many local men in the iron works, collieries and limekilns established by their father.

William helped select the site, and the Glasgow-born sculptor John Tweed was an obvious choice: Heerengracht Street in Cape Town had recently been graced by his bronze statue of Van Riebeeck, and Benson's pose would end up echoing that of the first European to settle in

South Africa; binoculars replace the stave, but both have their bodies half-turned into the unknown, their eyes gazing intently into foreign vistas to be taken in, mastered.

The committee congratulated themselves on getting the memorial for £840 instead of the £2,000 quoted, the more so because Tweed was advised and assisted on the project by no less a figure than his old mentor, Auguste Rodin. Benson's statue was much admired when it was unveiled by General Lord Methuen in 1904, although some in the large crowd may have been thrown by its positioning. Between them, Rodin and Tweed were able to persuade the committee that the statue, originally meant to face north towards Market Place and the Abbey, would be more aesthetically pleasing if it faced south; so positioned, the arc of the sun would fall on those sculptured features, that brave chest, the half-raised binoculars.

The south-west turn of the head, however, was no longer aligned with Allerwash House, the Benson family's attractive Georgian home lying six miles north east of Hexham, surrounded by mature trees and set in delightful farmland rolling effortlessly out to scenic moors; instead, Benson strains to look beyond the Total Beauty Salon and H. L. Caris & Son, Clock Repair Specialists. Ghosting through them is a heaving sea of veldt, a grassy ground-swell of bare undulating downs with deep hollows where whole armies could disappear.

3.

He has just dismounted after riding back from the head of his column with a squadron of Scottish Horse to take personal command of his rearguard, which is being harried by Boer snipers appearing and disappearing into the low cloud on the surrounding hills. Benson and his scanty line of 180 men are squinting into a fierce squall driven by a high southerly wind –

the demands of art, ignoring the rain, have at least swung his statue around to the correct compass point – when they see, saw through a rift of the clouds, a large body of horsemen in extended order galloping out of the blur of the sky-line. ‘There’s miles of them, begob!’ cries an Irish trooper, then the curtain closes again. For a minute or more they can see nothing, hear only the drumming of the rain. Benson is unprepared for this; he only knows of one other occasion, Vlaktefontein, when the Boers attacked in something like a cavalry charge. The squall eases for an instant, but the violence of the rain has raised a thick steam from the ground, still making it impossible for him to see for any distance. And then the mist is torn into flying ribbons as the mounted men burst through, brandishing their rifles and firing from the saddle. Yelling and whooping, they gallop over the low, ant-heap-dotted grass, two thousand burghers pounding the earth in a front a mile and a half long. To this day the old people of the eastern Transvaal say, when a rumble of thunder sets their coffee cups rattling, ‘the Boers are charging at Bakenlaagte.’

Less than thirty yards from Benson’s line the burghers fling themselves off their ponies and begin shooting in earnest. The soldiers attempt to fire back, but are enveloped in a tempest of lead discharged at them from point blank range. Benson is trying to get some sense of the overall situation; he raises his binoculars to the hazy ridge beyond and his right leg gives way beneath him. He falls amongst the men falling around him. The air is a hissing sleet of bullets, the fire so intense that all the dead will be found with multiple bullet wounds. Benson is hit again in the arm, but official reports say he was still to be seen ‘crawling from point to point in the firing line encouraging his men with a splendid example of coolness and courage’. His main concern is for the two 15-pounder field-guns he sent to cover the rearguard. The gunners only manage to fire three rounds of case before every one of them is cut down. The limbers are called for, but the instant they top the skyline of the ridge the

drivers and teams are dropped in their tracks. Even now Benson can see a Boer throwing himself on one of the Armstrong guns and screaming, '*Hoera, dis my kanon!*'

But it is Benson himself the Boers are after. He is infamous for leading his mounted men on night marches of anywhere up to fifty miles, and bursting out of the dawn on the Boers still asleep in their laagers. He comes striding into the present trailing the past like the smoke which the Boers used to track his progress as he burned their homesteads, rounded up old people, women, and children for the concentration camps, confiscated crops, fodder, and vehicles, smashed ovens and mills, and maimed cattle and sheep, leaving them to die of hunger and thirst. 'Ordinary clearing work,' it was called – Rensburghoop, Witbank, Kafferstat, each left behind in flames, the smoke from the destroyed homes rising high into the air, the route of his column drawn upon the sky. 'My adjutant and I watched this all day,' wrote Commandant Grobler of the Bethel Commando shortly before Bakenlaagte; 'it was shameful and we will still settle with Benson'.

4.

Soon the British gun position is seething with screaming horses, rifle fire and the moans of the dying and wounded. Benson calls for a volunteer to take a message to the camp ordering the artillery to fire shrapnel at the guns, right where he lay; they were to fire without regard for him and those near him, with the one object of clearing the Boers away from the guns. Trooper Grierson gets up to take the message and is immediately struck in the foot. The bullet deflects off bone and hits Benson in the stomach. He crumples against an anthill and stares dully at the Boers advancing five deep over his line, firing at everything that moves. He sees a dazed soldier stripped to his shirt by looters and beckons him over, giving him the

order for the camp and adding that no ambulances are to be sent to the hill, as the Boers will use them for cover to take the guns.

Benson sees a veldkornet chase down a Tommie, throw his coat over his head and force him around so that he can cut his throat with a penknife. He sees his Assistant Staff Officer, Captain Lloyd, arrive on the ridge from the safety of the camp; his horse and the man to whom he throws the reins fall instantly dead beside him, and a bullet breaks his wrist, but he thrust his arm into his coat and saunters, upright and smiling, towards his commander, and then disappears in a whirlwind of bullets. He sees old grey-headed Squadron-Quartermaster-Sergeant Warnock dragging boxes of ammunition with two young Troopers, and when they fall, grabbing a rifle and firing right and left in the very thick of the Boers, until three bullets throw him backwards. He sees Corporal Atkin, shot down with all his comrades at one of the guns, still trying to twist the breech-block out when a bullet passes right through both his hands. He sees his friend Eustace Guinness, a Colonel in the Artillery like himself whose wedding he had attended barely three years ago in a lovely little Northumberland village, hit by a murderous rain of fire as he tries to load one of the guns on his own, his dead crew strewn about him. He sees Lance-Corporal Bell, the last unwounded man at the guns, answering the Boers' call to him to surrender by raising his rifle and dying for it. He sees every officer and man of the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry killed where they lay, each perfectly in his proper place in the firing line.

He watches the ragged Boers stripping the British dead of their hats, coats, trousers, boots, and socks, leaving them in their shirts and drawers only. A wounded young private lying near him cries as he is robbed of his wool tunic, fifteen shillings, and a metal watch. Lieutenant Bircham dies screaming as his shattered leg is wrenched clean round whilst his spurs are being removed. Benson feels hands fumbling over him, and then is vaguely aware of someone ordering the looters to leave him alone. He assumes his rank is saving him from

being robbed, but he has no idea that he is being saved from worse by his dead friend, Colonel Guinness; the Boers, one of whom he can see tugging Guinness out of his uniform like a broken mannequin, have assumed that this Colonel of the Royal Regiment of Artillery is Colonel Benson, and they have now settled with him.

Guinness was a tall and powerfully built man, and it is a short little Boer that is pulling on his uniform, his compatriots laughing and calling out, '*Piet, Piet, jy lyk baie koddig in daardie groot Kolonel se uniform.*'

Benson's defeat is complete. He can hardly move, and keeps slipping in and out of consciousness, aware only of the smack of bullets into flesh, blood erupting anew from those around him clinging to the earth.

He allows himself to close his eyes, fade away. He opens them again, awoken by the strange silence that has fallen; the guns and rifles have stopped. In the twilight he sees that this is because an ambulance is rolling up onto the hill. Major Wool-Sampson must have taken it upon himself to disobey his commander's orders; no doubt he thought enough had been sacrificed for honour.

The Boers use this opportunity exactly as Benson had suspected they would, running up to the Armstrong guns and swinging them around to fire a few shells into the main column. They stop when they realize that their women and children, rounded up for the concentration camps, are being held in amongst the khakis. But the guns are dragged away.

With darkness came a thunderstorm, and the ambulance crew stumble about in the occasional glare of the lightening, soaked to the skin and feeling their way amongst the bodies scattered about where they fell. Benson's body is numb, distant, as he is lifted into the ambulance, but his mind is light and clear. It is between eight and nine that night when he is brought off the

field. He says little, other than transferring command to Wools-Sampson. Then he lies quietly, staring out through the large dilapidated doors of the wagon house in which he has been laid out along with the rest of the wounded until he sees the first clear dawn in days leach the paling sky. The Boers, like the mist, have melted away, and for a moment he is frustrated: this is his preferred hour of attack. By six o'clock it is bright, and his eyes glaze. Captain Boyle bends over him; 'No more night marches,' Benson says, his voice then fading away into the crisp, cool Highveld air. From their dying fall Boyle construes, 'it is all day now; Good-bye. God bless.' These, then, are officially recorded as Benson's last words.

He is buried, not with the majority of the 'unreturned brave' in the mass grave dug on the battle site, but in the family burial ground near the wagon house on Nooitgedacht farm. His grave is only two and a half feet deep, as if in expectation of his being raised once more.

5.

Cecil John Rhodes must – of course – fall. The statue that once overlooked the University of Cape Town was not created by John Tweed, although one could be forgiven for assuming that it was, seated as Rhodes is in the posture of Rodin's *Thinker*. But Tweed did owe many of his lucrative commissions to his being introduced to the archetypal empire-builder when he was just 24 years old. He was the only sculptor ever to portray Rhodes from life, and if the Cape Town statue of the great imperialist had been subjected to everything from being covered with faeces to having its nose chipped off before being taken away, then the statue of Rhodes Tweed did sculpt, larger-than-life in a three-piece-suit, facing north with his hat in one hand and a map of Africa in the other, disappeared comparatively quietly from its position in front of the Mafikeng railway station. It was secreted away to a spot near a side entrance of the Kimberley Club, an institution Rhodes helped found with fellow diamond

moguls, and members and guests now have their pictures taken with the stern-looking Rhodes. In the place he once occupied now stands a diminutive blue flower pot with a lone red rose.

Tweed's statue of Jan van Riebeeck, commissioned by Rhodes, still stands on Cape Town's Heerengracht, attracting its own indignities: a black bag over its head on Heritage Day, a placard reading 'I stole your land, so what?' Until the anti-imperialists broadened their fire, however, the figure of a mere Lieutenant Colonel in the minor market town of Hexham is safe from these irruptions of history. For now, male, military, imperial, upper class if not aristocratic, his statue a claim upon the past of a place where he was buried but never belonged, he strides on unmolested, another memorial invisible in its mute intransigence to the changes taking place around it.

There is no monument to mark the spot where Benson fell to match that statue near to where he was born. And now, with the air as thick as it should be with demands for the removal of symbols of the oppressive past, there never will be. On Gun Hill, as it has been known since his men died trying desperately to save the Armstrong 15-pounders, there are only the blue gums planted by the Boers, alien invaders displaying their worst features. Part of the Eucalyptus family native to Australia, here they grow too high too fast, the trunks weak, the roots too shallow, their long limbs breaking, whole trees pulling out of the earth. Wherever the trunks lie, new trees take eagerly to this foreign soil, sucking up what little water there is in this arid grassland, sickly, greenish white boughs rising up through tendrils of stripped bark, tangles of spindly branches and leaves.

‘Benson and the men buried on the farm in the graveyard and up there on the battlefield were moved from here, in the 1960s I think,’ said Ruben Le Roux. ‘The War Graves Committee decided to dig up all the British who died in the Boer War and rebury them in memorial gardens – those from the North Cape in Kimberly, those from the Highveld somewhere in Germiston, there by Johannesburg. I haven’t been.’

When I’d turned up at the security gates surrounding Ruben’s farm house asking after Benson, he’d generously offered to give me an informal tour of the battlefield, which was on his land. Grabbing my camera and notebook from my rental car, I’d joined him in his tough little bakkie as he headed off across his fields. We’d then spent some hours recreating the battle, identifying as precisely as we could where Benson had been shot. Now he was driving me back to my little car, which would never have made it over the harsh winter stubble of his maize crop. We stopped in the pale luminosity of the last of the twilight to look at the family cemetery where Benson had been buried.

I stared into the yellow of the bakkie’s headlights pooling in the rough veld as the evening began to take what colour the season allowed it. In the whispering shadows of the weeds all but overwhelming the ten or twelve headstones, I saw figures – dark shapes resting on shovels next to the surprisingly small piles of soil put to one side, a blackened face lit by occasional pulls on a pungent, rough hand-rolled cigarette, someone standing two or three feet below ground level, bending, sifting through the winter-dry sand, standing up and shaking off the clinging earth to peer at his finds before placing them in a tin tray next to the grave: metal clips from the high colour of an officer’s uniform, some with material attached; the left hand collar button with a piece of cord connected to a patch of light brown cloth; four other smaller buttons each with the crown and cannon image of a first class artillery man. He next brings up a steel splint, still set around a bone crushed just below the knee joint. Then an upper jawbone, with gold fillings glinting in the last two molars. A long tall man, the bones

would indicate, buried in full uniform, without boots. The splint would only have been put on if he were alive, so he would have died at some point after the procedure. Definitely Colonel George Elliott Benson. The wounds in the stomach – hitting the kidney? – and arm cannot be confirmed, as the bullets did not hit any bone. The flicked butt of the cigarette makes a glowing arc in the evening air; men stretch, stand, take a grip on their shovels.

‘October 1964,’ said Ruben, surprising me and pulling me back to the present. ‘I remember now, that’s when the digging up was done. It took about a week to do the whole battlefield.’

Did anyone, in all the business of exhuming and reintering, notice the error on the dark granite cross erected somewhere around 1903-4? A replacement for the original rough wooden one which had been stolen or destroyed within months of the burial, it read, ‘In Memory of Colonel George Elliott Benson R.A. of Five Stones, Allerwash, Northumberland.’

I thought of Fourstones, that village where Benson’s father had owned quarries, coal mines, and kilns. There was still a quarry in the area somewhere, but it was hidden away in the sea of silent, gracious green surrounding what was now another pretty little Northumberland village. On my last visit there, I had driven out to see the nearby church of St. Peter’s, where the Benson family had held a private memorial service for the handsome, gallant, brave baby of the family, coddled into being a hero, and now buried so far away.

The first hint of evening was in the air then too. Beyond the wall surrounding the graveyard, sheep grazed in a silver-blue haze and an ancient oak posed next to a picture-perfect pond – here was your glimmering landscape if ever there was one, a heavy beetle droning past in the thickening light, a curlew’s call resonating through the solemn stillness. Impossibly bucolic, impossibly distant from that naked, exposed ridge where Benson was gunned down, that scrubby graveyard where he had first been buried, just over two feet deep.

‘*Five Stones?*’ Then again, ‘*Brakenlaagte*’ – a mistake to each continent, with Benson rising up in bronze from his shallow grave somewhere between the two, forever pacing out the distance between them.

7.

Bucolic, yes, but when Benson sees Eustace Guinness draped lifeless over the carriage of his Armstrong 15-pounder, when he hears that wild-eyed Boer leaping onto its barrel and screaming, ‘Hooray, this is my canon,’ it is not only for England that he sends the order for guns at the main camp to shell the precise spot where his wounded and dying men are lying: it is also for Northumberland and, ghosting through Northumberland, that long-vanished kingdom that existed before England began, Northumbria, which persists in the strange, visionary unconscious barely hidden below the rough surfaces of the vast, glowering spaces to which its tiny hamlets and isolated farms clung in fear as much as for any hope of safety, its one city and its few larger towns foreign centres of law and order and trade and commerce barely recognized in the codes by which its violent, unforgiving landscapes live.

Hadrian’s Wall, and after the Romans, the Vikings, then a border again, a constantly shifting, blood-soaked frontline in centuries of conflict between the Kingdoms of England and Scotland. In this sense, Lieutenant-Colonel George Elliott Benson was a true child of the Borders; military action has been a fact of life for Northumberland for so long that it seems part of its watercourses, stony crags, and wide sweeps of empty land, all open to the most extreme weather.

Not that nature alone decreed this: as a depressed regional economy, historically its only consistent export has been cannon-fodder for the British Army. In Benson's time, recruiting sergeants were kept busy in Northumberland, and prominent 'pro-Boer' anti-war Liberals were given a hard time in the 'khaki election' of 1900 by a Tyneside population enthusiastic for war – not to mention the military contracts this generated. That ever-inventive Tyneside industrialist, William George Armstrong, 1st Baron Armstrong, CB, FRS, had by then made Newcastle as famous for the manufacture of armaments as for coal mining. When the *Chronicle* noted with pride that 'Tyneside has become one of the world's greatest centres for the production of weapons of death,' there was a general understanding in the city that it was 'most prosperous at times of peril.'

Armstrong may have gone on to become a philanthropist who endowed the city with hospitals, schools, and parks, but when he died at Crag-side, his vast country house, on what was also to be the last Christmas Benson would spend at Allerwash, the black-bordered edition of the *Newcastle Daily Journal* made a point of noting that he was responsible for both 'the most wonderful machinery of production' and 'the most tremendous machinery of murder'; 'there is,' the *Journal* concluded, 'something that appals the imagination in the application of a cool and temperate mind like Lord Armstrong's to the science of destruction.'

And is there not something appalling too in that image of Benson, his leg shattered below the knee, crawling amongst his men in the squall of rain and lead that Bakenlaagte has become, 'encouraging all around him with a splendid example of coolness and courage.'

‘19967 | SAHRA’ – a report prepared for The South African Heritage Resources Agency on a proposed mining project at Matla near Kriel in the Mpumalanga Province, South Africa, by Archaeon Culture & Cultural Resource Consultants.

‘Exxaro is proposing the development of an opencast and underground mine on the farms Bakenlaagte 84 IS, Haasfontein 85 IS, Kruisementfontein 95 IS, Moedverloren 88 IS,’ writes Dr. A.C. van Vollenhoven, writer of the report and accredited member of the South African Heritage Resources Agency. He has been tasked with carrying out the required archaeological and heritage survey of the various farms – including Nooitgedacht, Schaapkraal, Onverwacht, all the farms associated with Benson’s last hours – which will be affected by the coal mining operation. This includes identifying ‘all objects, sites, occurrences and structures of an archaeological or historical nature located on the property and to assess the significance of these cultural resources in terms of their archaeological, historical, scientific, social, religious, aesthetic and tourism value.’

The mining rights area covers ‘approximately 22 000 ha.,’ all of which ‘has to be documented and the possible impact of the proposed development described. In addition, ‘suitable mitigation measures to minimize possible negative impacts on the cultural resources are to be proposed.’ ‘Cultural resources’ are defined in the report as ‘all non-physical and physical man-made occurrences, as well as natural occurrences associated with human activity;’ these include graves and cemeteries.

The report is thorough: before beginning the physical survey, a survey of literature was undertaken, followed by a field survey in which people from local communities were interviewed. ‘Background regarding the different phases of human history’ is also given, beginning with the Stone and Iron Ages. Section 9.3 of the report covers the ‘Historical Age,’ which starts, according to Dr. van Vollenhoven, BA, BA (Hons), DTO, NDM, MA

(Archaeology) [UP], MA (Culture History) [US], DPhil (Archaeology) [UP], Man Dip [TUT], DPhil (History) [US], ‘with the first recorded oral histories in the area; and includes ‘the moving into the area of people that were able to read and write.’

Other cultural groups which had occupied the area are duly noted before being written out of the report:

At the beginning of the 19th century the Phuthing, a South Sotho group, stayed to the east of the Matla area. The Koni of Makopole stayed to the north-east and the Ndzundza Ndebele to the west. During the Difaquane they fled to the south, south-west and north-west as Mzilikazi’s impi moved in from the southeast. During this time the Swazi also moved into this area (Bergh 1999: 10-11; 109). They however did not settle here.

‘The first white people in this area were the party of the traveller Robert Scoon in 1836.

White farmers only settled here after 1850,’ the report determines, the comparatively recent date doing nothing to undermine the fact that they did settle, unlike the Phuthing, the Koni, the Ndzundza Ndebele, and the Swazi.

During the survey thirty sites of cultural heritage significance are located; twenty-six of these are given a rating of high cultural significance, two medium and two low. Site 30 deals with ‘the main area where the Battle of Bakenlaagte was fought’. The citation for this is ‘Personal communication: R. Le Roux.’

I could see Ruben Le Roux now, walking Dr. A.C. van Vollenhoven as he had me, over Nooitgedacht and Schaapkraal, explaining how little of the Battle of *Brakenlaagte* had been fought on the farm Bakenlaagte, pointing out precisely where the defensive positions were

and how the final assault took place, where the wounded were taken and where the graves had been.

Dr. van Vollenhoven – he would not have invited Ruben to call him Anton – with his qualifications in Archaeology and Cultural History and History from the University of Pretoria, his two Masters degrees and Doctorate topped up with another Doctorate in History from America, boils this down succinctly:

At Bakenlaagte, which is within the mining area, the forces of the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek (ZAR or Transvaal) under command of Commandant-General Louis Botha defeated the British forces commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel G.E. Benson. The British commander lost his life during the battle.

One however needs to realize that a battle is fought over a large area and that almost the entire mining area may have been part of this particular battle. No photograph was taken as no feature or structure from the battle remains.

As the Anglo-Boer War was an important event in the history of South Africa, the site is given a rating of high cultural significance. However the lack of features has to be taken into consideration. There is no visible evidence of the battle and therefore the site cannot be preserved.

Dr. van Vollenhoven's recommendation is, then, that 'the battle should be commemorated via a plaque placed next to the road, as close as possible to the site.'

Still nothing on the site then, the precise place where Colonel Benson raised his binoculars and the bullet tore into his poised right leg, smashing the bone just below the knee before ricocheting off into the flesh of his arm. That piece of ground on which he fell when the veldt came alive with Boers materialising out of the sodden haze, ghosts using their Mausers like

pistols at such close range, will have its surface stripped off by massive walking draglines and bucket-wheel excavators, creating a vast terraced complex exposing the seams right beneath the soil from which the ore deposit will be broken up by explosives and hauled out in an endless stream of heavy vehicles crawling across the landscape in a haze of dust, pollution, and carbon emissions.

In his conclusion to his report, the good Doctor notes: ‘the threat of the ground collapsing under heritage sites is very real as similar incavings as a result of mining activities have been seen throughout the survey area.’ To this he adds, ‘there always is a secondary impact as descendants may find it difficult to visit the site once mining has commenced.’

8.

MONUMENT MAY BE MOVED TO MAKE WAY FOR BUSES

By Evan Hunt, 17 Dec 2013

BOER War hero Colonel George Benson could be on the march again.

For the statue to the great man, which has stood at the top of Hexham’s Beaumont Street for more than a century, may have to be moved – to accommodate a new roundabout.

Northumberland County Council is pressing ahead with their proposed sale of the Hexham Bus Station site and the relocation of buses to on-street stands on Priestpottle. Ostensibly, the move is triggered by safety concerns arising from the difficulty of turning buses within the current site.

A consequence of the plan would be that the Grade II monument to Boer War hero Lieutenant-Colonel George Benson would have to be moved from the plinth it has occupied since 1904.

The Benson's Gates at the entrance to the Abbey Grounds would also have to be sacrificed to allow buses to access the street.

NCC coffers will benefit from the sale of the site but it is unclear how satisfactory on-street bus arrangements will be in Hexham's historic Priestpopple, nor how buses will negotiate the narrow Battle Hill.

Despite overwhelming public support for keeping the bus station where it is, Northumberland County Council still appears keen for the bus station site to be redeveloped into shops and offices. Talks are underway with potential developers, who could produce the £500,000 scheme to open up Hexham town centre.

'I cannot believe that the Council are considering such an act of gross vandalism to one of the most attractive parts of Hexham,' said one resident. 'The fact that our local Councillors apparently support this scheme is even more unbelievable. If they do, they have no credibility as representatives of our community and of Hexham Town. Do they have no vision, taste, or civic pride? How did we allow ourselves to elect such short-sighted people?'

The Town Councillors say that NCC has presented them with a fait-accompli, while several of them had stated their wholesale opposition to the loss of the central bus station site. NCC officers said in response that the current site was 'unworkable' and would cost 'multi millions' to rectify.

'It is unfortunate that the old soldier will have to go,' one of the Councillors who supports the plan said. 'We will also lose that nice sweep of pavement leading to the Abbey Grounds, with the Hero of Brakenlaagte's Memorial Gates being moved further back into the park.

'However, it's not a bad thing for Hexham as it will bring a big benefit in terms of traffic movement. It might even be possible to reopen the underground toilets in Priestpopple which were closed many years ago.'

9.

So much for commemoration.

One evening, wrapped in a comfortable glow of food and wine, the note taker swings past Benson striding through the night up Beaumont Street. He'd treated himself to a lone dinner at a little bistro in Hexham he's fond of and has no plans to stop, but something catches his eye and makes him pull to a halt and look back. The bronze statue on its stone pedestal looms up, as always, larger-than-life – larger than life and, towering over the hemmed-in traffic island, all the more ridiculous for this: Benson is, tonight, adorned with a traffic cone balanced at a jaunty angle on his bare head.

Taken aback at first, he remembers someone – he couldn't offhand remember who – telling him that this happened occasionally after the local lads had had one of their more riotous nights out. Being told hadn't prepared him for the actual effect, however, the way in which the addition to the officer's head was made all the more comical by his noble features, his impressive moustache, his stern and alert expression. It as if in that instant before his tragic death everything he stood for had been transformed into farce.

The farmer who had, on his last visit to what he still occasionally thinks of as home, generously walked him over the battle site told him that the old people in the area use ‘baken laagte’ to refer to a place where the high-altitude grassland meets the low-altitude plains dotted by dense clusters of trees and shrubs – that uncertain, unsettling zone between Highveld and Lowveld, where one is at home in both and in neither.

Of course: *af te baken*, ‘delineate’ – indicate the exact position of a border or boundary. Its other meaning in English will not ghost through the Afrikaans, but suddenly now, with the name floating free of its bronze lettering, he looks at the statue and understands.

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(Note: as this paper is a practice-led research project in which the activity of creating is the primary research method, it is informed by the texts listed rather than dependent upon specifically-cited references to them).

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